The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults

Volume 11 N. 2: April 2020 www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya

When Libraries Aren't Challenged: Librarians Discuss a Lack of Patron Challenges to Their Collections

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Abstract

Many public libraries receive challenges from patrons, when patrons request that certain materials be removed or relocated through a formal process. However, many other public libraries avoid this fraught situation. The differences between these libraries is not clear—why do some libraries face patron challenges while other libraries do not? To address this question, the authors sought interviews with children's and teen librarians in public libraries who had never dealt with patron challenges. Twenty-five telephone interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed with DeDoose software, which allows for iterative team web-based coding. The qualitative coding revealed three predominant themes. Librarians discussed their collections, their patrons, and their actions as librarians in their attempts to explain their lack of challenges. We analyze these interpretations and suggest future research directions.

Introduction

The American Library Association (ALA) defines censorship as "the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups, or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous" (2007, para. 4). Oltmann (2016b, 23) notes that "in libraries,

censorship can take several forms" (see also McMenemy 2009; Knox 2014a). These censorious acts include redacting words or phrases, cutting pages out of a book, labeling materials, restricting access to materials, or not purchasing items likely to be controversial. Sometimes potential censorship comes in the form of a challenge to library materials—that is, individuals or an organization challenges the inclusion of certain content in the library.

Such acts stand in direct opposition to one of the core values of librarianship: intellectual freedom. According to Knox (2014b), the principle of intellectual freedom is codified in contemporary librarianship. This facet of librarianship is supported by the Library Bill of Rights (LBR), with Principles I–IV pertaining to intellectual freedom (IF) and censorship, and the role of librarians and libraries in cultivating IF, as well as forestalling and confronting attempts at censorship. Those principles (ALA [1939] 2019) state:

> I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
>
> II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
>
> III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
>
> IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.
>
> V. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

Given that intellectual freedom is a core value of librarianship and is codified in the profession (Knox 2014b), censorship must be seen as an antithesis of librarianship (Asheim 1953; Doyle 2002; Intner 2004). Challenging the inclusion of certain content, likewise, is antithetical to librarianship. Doyle (2002, 18) explains, "The librarian's bias is that the collection should be unbiased. But an unbiased collection is precisely what censors disapprove of" (see also Asheim 1953). Responding to challenges—standing up for intellectual freedom—has been portrayed as an important (though sometimes minor) aspect of librarianship (see Preer 2014; Zimmer and McCleer 2014; ALA 2018).

However, some librarians never face challenges. Their collections go uncontested. The differences between challenged and unchallenged libraries remains unexplored in the current research.

Research Questions

Therefore, this research sought to address the following research questions:

- Why might some libraries not experience challenges—especially in youth services, given that many challenges are to youth materials?
- Are there librarian actions or perspectives that might explain the lack of patron challenges in some libraries?
- What do youth service librarians themselves think about not being challenged by patrons?

Literature Review

Although the ALA provides one definition of censorship (see introduction), it may be useful to consider additional perspectives. Intner (2004, 8) defines censorship as "the systematic and deliberate exclusion of materials that would be considered protected speech," while Oppenheim and Smith (2004, 160) describe censorship as "something [that] is withheld from access by another." The philosopher Mathiesen (2008, 576) writes that to censor is to

> restrict or limit access to an expression, portion of an expression, or category of expression, which has been made public by its author, based on the belief that it will be a bad thing if people access the content of that expression.

Jenkins (2008, 228) explains that "book censorship involves causes, beliefs, and goals that are far larger than any particular text. . . . [It's] the tensions of society writ small."

Along these lines, Knox (2014a) notes that there are narrow and broader conceptualizations of censorship, and these different perceptions can be a source of tension. For example, people who challenge a book's inclusion in the library may view censorship as something only a government can do, meaning their act wouldn't "count" as censorship; in contrast, the ALA (and the authors cited above) define censorship far more broadly, to include challenges and removal of library items. (For a broad definition of censorship, consider Knox [2014a, 742], who writes, "Censorship is the realization of the intimate relationship between

knowledge and power. At its heart, the practice of censorship is predicated on who gets to decide what certain people or groups should know.")

Self-censorship—when librarians themselves censor items—may be even more pernicious. As Gregory (2018, 168) explains, "If the book never makes it to the shelves, discussion about its content never happens, and its themes are preemptively struck from the minds of children and/or adults." There is a fine line between not selecting a book because its themes or content are inappropriate for one's audience versus not selecting a book because one is concerned its content may result in challenges or controversy; the latter action is self-censorship. Gregory, in her collection management textbook, encourages librarians to avoid self-censorship because it results in reduced access to information.

The ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) indicates that 491 library materials (including books, DVDs, programs, services, and displays) were challenged or censored in 2017; of those, 354 challenges to materials had more details available. Patrons accounted for 42% of the challenges, with 56% occurring at public libraries (ALA 2019). Parents accounted for 32% of the challenges, which could have occurred at schools (which accounted for 25% of challenges) or at public libraries (ALA 2019). While a small percentage of public library challenges are initiated in-house and by librarians, most come from patrons.

According to young adult author Malinda Lo (2014), "Analysis of the most banned/challenged books in the U.S. shows that diverse books are disproportionately targeted for book challenges and censorship." Based on her research, Lo surmises that "books that fall outside the white, straight, abled mainstream are challenged more often than books that do not destabilize the status quo." Challenges to these diverse books have not just come from library patrons; they have also resulted from self-censorship by librarians. According to a 2019 report from the American Library Association, the association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) "has noticed a representative pushback by those who believe that a more diverse and just society poses a threat to their beliefs and their way of life" (Rosa 2019, 15). What does this mean about the state of censorship in America's public libraries? According to the Banned Books Week (BBW) website (www.bannedbooksweek.org), the top 10 reasons for censorship in 2018 were as follows:

1. **LGBTQ Content**
2. **Sexually Explicit**

3. Profanity
4. Racism
5. Violence
6. **Religious Viewpoint**
7. **Sex Education**
8. Suicide
9. **Drug and Alcohol Use**
10. Nudity

It should be noted, however, that unless a challenge progresses far enough to become newsworthy, libraries must self-report their challenges to the ALA for them to be counted in the annual totals (Jenkins 2008). Thus, many challenges likely go unreported. Many others never go beyond a verbal complaint. In this study, we follow the ALA's (2018, para. 3) formal definition of a challenge:

> A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others.

To counter challenges to library materials, librarians rely on their core value of intellectual freedom. Again, we can turn to Intner (2004, 7), who defines intellectual freedom as "inclusion—the willingness to add things and be open enough to look at them." Cooper (2010, 218) adds that "intellectual freedom is the freedom, or the ability and the right, of individuals to allow their minds to take them wherever they may lead in their search for understanding and, thus, information and ideas." Importantly, Calkins (2014, para. 2) specifies how intellectual freedom should be interpreted for teens: "Parents and guardians have the right to decide what their children have access to, but they don't have the right to decide what all children have access to" (see also Connelly 2009). Finally, Asheim (1953) explains that selectors (librarians) have a different orientation than censors:

> The selector begins, ideally, with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; the censor does not. The aim of the selector is to promote reading, not to inhibit it; to multiply the points of view which will find expression, not limit them; to be a channel for communication, not a bar against it. . . . [S]election seeks to protect the right of the reader to read;

> censorship seeks to protect—not the right—but the reader himself [*sic*] from the fancied effects of his reading.

Quoting Asheim (1983), Doyle (2002, 18) states, "An unbiased collection represents all kinds of literature, objectional though some of these may be to the librarian or to most people. The unbiased collection gives users free, unrestricted access to the 'the wildest possible variety' of viewpoints." According to the ALA, intellectual freedom "encompasses the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas." Intellectual freedom is important because it "is the basis for our democratic system" (ALA 2007, paras. 3, 2; see also Cooper 2010; Schliesman 2008).

Calkins (2014, paras. 19, 6) elaborates on the importance of intellectual freedom for teen patrons, in particular, noting that these patrons are "undergoing rapid intellectual, psychological, and social change." She notes that a librarian's job is to "provide access to information on a wide range of topics, depicting a wide range of experiences, so that teenagers who come to the library looking to broaden their horizons find the materials to do so."

Despite the significance of intellectual freedom for teen patrons, and for librarians in general, relatively little research examines this area. Dresang (2006, 171) notes that publications about intellectual freedom and censorship are typically philosophical, legal, descriptive of policy, or case studies. Knox (2014b, 16) says that "perhaps the most common type of research on intellectual freedom and censorship is written by practitioners and consists primarily of case studies and reflective essays." The research described here thus fills an important gap in the research, by describing the viewpoints and experiences of actual librarians practicing in the field. Further, we focus on librarians who have not experienced materials challenges to see what lessons may be learned—in contrast to much of the extant literature, which focuses on librarians who have experienced challenges.

Methods

We created a semi-structured interview guide, which was approved by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board; next, recruitment messages were distributed via email Listservs (such as the Young Adult Library Services Association [YALSA] Listserv) and social media (such as Facebook messages and groups). For example, the message posted to relevant Facebook groups said, "Hello! We are conducting a study of children's and young adult librarians. We want to interview librarians who have never had a patron challenge their

collection. We want to learn about how you've avoided challenges—whether you've taken specific actions or not, we think you may have useful approaches and ideas to share with other librarians," followed by contact information for the authors. From these recruitment methods, a total of twenty-five willing participants were identified and interviewed. Although we intended to interview a balanced sample, all but one respondent identified as female (the exception was male). Respondents came from across the U.S., in large and small library systems, as well as liberal, moderate, and conservative areas. Respondents all had MLS or equivalent degrees, and all identified as youth or children librarians. To protect their confidentiality, we do not provide more detailed information about them.

The data for this project was collected via qualitative telephone interviews. A qualitative approach is an appropriate method for collecting individuals' perspectives and reflections (Oltmann 2016c). The researchers determined that interviews were the best method of data collection. This method of data collection allowed for interviewer/interviewee engagement, which would not have been possible with a survey. The interview methodology allowed the researchers to elaborate on these interview questions, often explaining the Request for Reconsideration policy to those whose libraries did not have such a policy in place.

The interviews lasted an average of 24:57 minutes (minimum of 13:30, maximum of 52:02); they followed a semi-structured format. After transcription, the interviews were coded iteratively in DeDoose, which allows for web-based team coding. To protect confidentiality, each respondent was given a randomly selected pseudonym. Identifying details in their responses are obfuscated.

Findings and Discussion

As described in the introduction and research questions sections, this research project focused on librarians who have *not* experienced materials challenges. These respondents described possible reasons for the lack of challenges; their reasons can be categorized into three groups: perspectives on the collection, views about patrons, and things that librarians do. This section describes and analyzes the data we collected.

Perspectives on the Collection

Respondents described the importance of considering the age appropriateness of items they were selecting for their collections, as well as the importance of dividing one's collection into age-appropriate sections, such as children's, juvenile, teen, and so on. One librarian, Mildred, explained, "We've had parents in the kids' section ask or say that they are uncomfortable with a couple of books. . . . A lot of those cases were because teen books had accidentally been put into [the] kids[' section]." Marie said, "Occasionally, I look at stuff and think in terms of who's the reader going to be? . . . I might put a book in the teen room even if it's called a juvenile book, because it looks kind of long and difficult." Joanna, similarly, said:

> I think that we are very careful about where we end up putting those books. So, if we order a book to be in the children's nonfiction collection and it comes in and we're like, "No, this is actually a little bit older, a little more mature," then we put it in the YA nonfiction collection.

As these quotations imply, having age-demarcated sections in a public library can be complicated. Some books may be intended for a particular audience (often specified by the publisher), but librarians may think the book should be directed toward a different age group. All of the respondents who described relocating books indicated that they moved the items "up" in age—from children's to juvenile, from juvenile to young adult, and so on.

Furthermore, different public libraries delineate these sections differently. In correspondence with various library associations (such as the Young Adult Library Services Association and the Public Library Association), representatives confirmed that these categories do not have standard, consistent definitions across libraries. Erin captured this problem:

> A lot of libraries will . . . group young adults together, ages twelve through eighteen, or even eleven through eighteen . . . and there's certainly stuff in some of the books in my collection that I think, if I were the parent of a twelve-year-old, I wouldn't want them reading that. And I wouldn't want them walking into a room and thinking this stuff was for them.

Here, we see respondents anticipating challenges or concerns with the collection and relocating items. Sometimes this is done out of a genuine belief that a title is better suited for a different age range, while other times this action may be taken to forestall a challenge.

These different motivations matter: the former is being a thoughtful collector, while the latter is being a censor of one's own collection. Cassie noted that "a lot of books I know that are

normally challenged are in that middle section [which she defined as fifth to sixth grade] and they usually end up in YA," and Michelle said, "If it's had really good reviews and everything, I'd buy it and just decide for myself [if] it's too mature for the K–5 [kindergarten through fifth-grade] group. Or do I put it in the teen room?" With Michelle, we see a librarian who is willing to disregard the recommendations of the author and/or publisher and "decide for myself" about the supposed maturity level of library items. If such actions are done preemptively (that is, *before* a challenge occurs), this is effectively censorship, as the books will be less available to the presumptive readers. A fifth- or sixth-grader used to going to one section to select books will be unlikely to go to the YA section for some books—in fact, this is what people are counting on when they move books to an older-aged section.

A more reasonable and thoughtful approach is described by Caroline, who was told by a colleague that a certain book had an "adult" sex scene that was inappropriate for teens. Caroline explained:

> I read the whole thing and it definitely . . . reads exactly like an adult sex scene, not a teen sex scene. But at the same time, I didn't feel comfortable moving it, unless I get a complaint. I am going to leave it here. Because I've had teens read adult books. Would I hand that to a twelve-year-old who told me they read other things similarly? Probably not. But I'm not going to move it away just because of these two pages.

Graphic novels raised particular concern for the respondents because of their very nature, as Jackson said, "[in] a graphic novel, where there's the image on the page," as opposed to pure text. Joanna noted that she explained the broad range of graphic novels to parents and minors whenever she took people to that section, saying that the books ranged from middle school to early adulthood so not everything would be appropriate for middle schoolers. Ramona described an unusual approach to adult graphic novels: they were placed in the nonfiction section "to hide some of the more graphic adult books. But I'm not putting them on the 'new' shelf [either]." This, again, seems to effectively put these books out of reach of much of their intended audience. As with other types of books, respondents noted moving graphic novels "up" in age, often putting teen graphic novels in the adult section—particularly if they contained nudity, sex, or extreme violence.

In contrast to these perspectives, Ariel reported shelving a graphic novel that could have caused controversy because it contained nudity. She said, "I would prefer to keep it on the shelf

and if it gets challenged then we can address it then, rather than take it off and just assume someone has a problem with it." Marie also noted, "If [a book] is published with the intention of a teenager reading it, I'm comfortable putting it in the [teen] room."

Despite concerns about how to categorize certain materials, nearly all respondents were confident they had a diverse collection; in fact, twenty-one out of twenty-five participants explicitly indicated their collections were not "safe" but contained a wide range of perspectives and topics. Hazel, for example, noted:

> I was looking at the top 100 banned books, and every single one of the ones I would say that are for our age group, we've got it. . . . I don't avoid something because of controversy; if anything, if it's gotten good reviews, I will make sure I have it.

Similarly, Marie said, "My collection is not safe. I keep waiting for someone to storm in with a book and tell me to stop buying so many books about gay teenagers. But, nope, my collection's not particularly safe." Jenn added, "I can't think of any risqué books because I don't think of books that way. But we never have any situation where we say, 'Well, we don't want to buy this book because somebody's going to challenge it.'"

Several respondents noted they were likely to purchase items to round out or strengthen their collections. For instance, Kendall said, "If it's a sensitive topic, I'll say we are going to get that because we don't have anything else [on that]." In addition, Theresa reported that she tries to "include items that have diverse characters . . . [because] it's important for us to make sure that we are reflective of the world that we live in, and not just the community that we are in." Ariel elaborated on this approach:

> My feeling is that if you can really actively collect things that are diverse and you can substantiate your reasons [and] why you keep the collection diverse, never assume that things are going to create a problem. And if they do, you can address them when they happen; but like I said, if you can back up your purchases and why you made them, and [why] you collect the way you do, then there's a good chance that even if something is challenged, that you can convince somebody that what you're collecting is best for your patronage . . . if you know that something is right for your patrons and right for your collection, then you should put it in there.

Returning to the above theme about categorizing materials in an age-appropriate manner, Joanna explained:

> I can't think of any topic that we've shied away from ordering, because, like, we don't think it would serve the community or [we] were shying away from a potential book challenge. I think we try and be careful about where we put the books so they are most likely to find their intended audience.

This quote neatly summarizes the dilemma that seemed to arise from respondents' discussion of their collections. On the one hand, they overwhelmingly saw their own collections as diverse and covering a wide range of topics, including "difficult" or potentially controversial topics. On the other hand, respondents also expressed concern about categorizing and shelving books in an age-appropriate way, which, for some respondents, meant taking preemptive caution to avoid challenges by "aging up" some items.

Twenty respondents emphasized that in collecting diverse materials, they were attempting to collect resources that teens and other patrons needed. Samantha, for example, said, "I think being a teen is when you're exploring life and figuring things out for yourself, and part of that is figuring out what you think about a whole lot of things that maybe people do consider controversial." Similarly, Martha explained:

> I feel like I push the envelope a little bit, and because that's the information that the kids are looking for, that they're trying to decide their identity, knowing that they're not alone . . . they can read about other kids or teens that are going through the same thing. That's always been my philosophy.

Jackson noted that "I have deliberately been purchasing more LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] for the collection, because I know that we do have a small LGBT population here." Stella took an interesting stance on this: "My role here is for the teens and not for the parents, so anything I [can] do to support my kids, whether it's reading materials [or other materials], I can do to help them figure out their own life." Erin added that she was likely to collect material that could be challenged "because I think it's important for teens to have access to those books that I know the school libraries have a harder time [with]." Interestingly, these respondents who focused on providing books that minors "need" focused exclusively on teens. There was no discussion of younger patrons needing access to information that could be considered controversial.

Views about Patrons

In addition to discussing the collections, respondents addressed some aspects of their patrons as well. In particular, the respondents noted that parents played (or should play) an important role in selecting appropriate materials; many also noted that they had a liberal patron base.

Hazel explained, "For the really thinking parent, they monitor what their kids are reading, so they don't even bother with anything that isn't right for them." From her perspective, some parents prevented their minors from accessing material that the parents disapproved of, so this circumvented the need to challenge items—in this scenario, minors would not gain access to materials that were controversial. Marie, similarly, said, "People seem to have an attitude that it's their responsibility if they have something in particular they don't want their child exposed to, people seem to feel it's their personal responsibility to check." Shelby elaborated on this:

> We can't decide what's right for every single kid that walks through the door. So it's the parents' responsibility to decide for them. And then if you have an issue or are worried about it, then you have to come in with them [meaning parents have to come in with their own kids].

Cassie noted that this line of thought applied to minors of all ages. She said, "It's at that specific moment in their life, what are they ready for? I don't think as a librarian I should be determining that; I think that should be determined by the kid and the parent."

Furthermore, respondents indicated that parents had responsibility for their own children but not others' children. Suzanne explained, "I think even our conservative parents are open-minded enough to realize they can't determine what other parents or children are going to read." Marie added that "people know if they are conservative, that's their family and that's their values, but it's not something that they try and impose on other people." This line of thought echoes the ALA's guidance on parental involvement with minors' reading choices.

While respondents felt that the onus for determining appropriateness was on parents, they also generally reported having liberal patrons (even those who lived in areas generally seen as conservative). Amy, for example, explained that she lived in "a place that's a hallmark of intellectual freedom and free speech. . . . We are an envelope-pushing town and our collectors collect accordingly." Camilia said, "Granted, I am living in New York, which is a more liberal area; the South or part of the Midwest could be a little bit harder" for librarians who want to collect a wide range of viewpoints and topics. Others likewise noted that their particular locales

were known for being liberal and wondered if less liberal areas would experience more challenges. It's unclear, from our data, if liberal locales do experience fewer challenges than conservative ones. Ariel said, "We are more liberal in comparison to other branches" of the same library system, and Jenna surmised, "My guess is it's because it's a largely liberal community." Shelby added, "I wonder if it [the lack of challenges] is just because demographically speaking it tends to be a more liberal area." Hazel explained, "We don't have any strong really conservative groups, that I'm aware of, in our city." She felt that the lack of these groups might be tied to the lack of challenges her library experienced.

Things That Librarians Do

Finally, several reasons that the respondents suggested for the lack of challenges were based on things that librarians do or aspects of librarians' jobs, such as relying on review journals as materials are selected, performing readers' advisories, mentally preparing for challenges, diffusing concerns that are raised, and having a reconsideration policy available.

Hazel explained the importance of professional reviews in relation to potentially controversial materials:

> That's where you need to make sure it's being well-received and well-reviewed, so that's really your armor. I feel that if you have that to back you up and say that this is a well-written book on an important topic, then you shouldn't be worried what people will say.

Many respondents mentioned specific sources on which they rely, including *Hornbook, School Library Journal, Publishers Weekly,* Amazon, *Booklist, Voice of Youth Advocates, Library Journal,* and *Kirkus Reviews*. Jenna simply said, "I do rely on the reviews," and Camilia reiterated, "I pretty much look at reviews." Erin added, "I am very careful to read reviews and take professional reviewers into account. . . . If somebody does come and complain, I can say, 'Well, this professional journal recommended it for this age range.'"

These respondents point to the important (and understudied) role of reviews, particularly for items that could be considered controversial or potentially sensitive. Caroline said, "If I have to pause about a book, I'm like, 'Hmmm, it got really good reviews,'" and then she generally would purchase it. In other words, items that could cause concern—leading librarians to pause about adding them to the collection—have their reviews scrutinized. This implies that book

reviewers have a professional responsibility to be forthright in their reviews, while at the same time not being overly cautious or scaremongering about sensitive topics.

Once the items are purchased and added to the collection, according to respondents, another important aspect of their roles is to perform readers' advisories. They work to connect readers to books that are appropriate, interesting, relevant, and desired. Caroline explained that when she conducts readers' advisories, she tries "to gauge from [the patrons] if they need or want to censor themselves, then I accommodate that as best I can." Jenn also added, "I'd say that the concern isn't censorship, so much as we want to fit the right books with the right reader, and just making sure we get a book that we think the kid will enjoy." She expanded with an example:

> [We have parents] where they are saying, "My child is a super reader; we want harder books." Sometimes we have the conversation of "these harder books have x, y, and z—are you okay with your child reading books like this?" And so, again, not that we've ever had challenges, but we also have a very strong readers' advisory in the youth services [department], and we want people to value that as a service we have.

Erin noted that in her library, readers' advisories were also important, especially because the teen department contained material for younger and older teens—and some of the materials for older teens contained "pretty graphic sexual content" or were "significantly more violent." She said that she might "hesitate to recommend" these books because "it's more or less an issue of interest and things I think would be likely to start a complaint or get challenged." This respondent exemplifies both the importance of a readers' advisory and the intellectual freedom challenge inherent in this service. There is a gray area between recommending "appropriate" books and avoiding recommending books that could lead to a challenge.

Respondents also suggested that it was important to prepare for and try to anticipate challenges. For example, Camilia said that librarians should "have to kind of try to think of different things, how to say it, how to be neutral and not offend people and kind of diffuse situations." Similarly, Hazel said she would "encourage librarians to be brave. We're there putting out important ideas, helping them get out into the world, where other people can read them. I think we're activists in our own way." Erin added, "I do prepare for [challenges] even though it hasn't happened. I would like to be able to keep these books on the shelf if they're ever challenged. I have to make sure I have the tools to do that."

How can one prepare? Mildred said, "Just be very aware of your library collection policies. And if you do receive a challenge or somebody questions it, make sure you know what the policy is, so you can back yourself up." Fourteen respondents discussed diffusing concerns when they are raised. Theresa said:

> If somebody were to object to something, I think the biggest and most important thing is just to listen to them. A lot of times they just have to get whatever it is off of their chests, and similar to a customer that might be complaining in a store, and then once they're done and they know that you listened and they feel like you heard what they said, they might be willing to hear as to why you decided to keep the thing in the collection. Then maybe everything's going to be okay.

Likewise, Shelby said, "We would definitely try to work with the patron as best as we possibly could to get them to understand why we couldn't remove a book from the collection." Ramona agreed, noting, "I think a lot of what we do in here, in this building, it's diffused before it goes any further." Respondents explained the importance of talking to patrons and explaining the reasoning behind the collection, as well as emphasizing that parents and guardians could oversee the selections for their own children. Cassie, for example, said, "If you actually talk to them and listen to them, I think that can help diffuse a lot of the tension."

Several individuals described specific instances of diffusing tension. Mindy described a situation in which a mom was upset about "the LGBT book display" and talked to the director; eventually, the concerned parent talked to Mindy, who "found her some books for her daughter [which] mitigated the problem."

Jenna noted that "my experience has been almost 100%, as I recollect over the years, once [the concerned individuals] have to put it in writing, they don't. They don't want to go that far" of putting their concerns into a formal challenge. Sheila described an incident in which a lady was upset about the Harry Potter novels, fearing they were satanic and supported witchcraft. After a long conversation, Sheila said, the concerned individual took a reconsideration form with her but did not complete or return it. Sheila explained, "They see that I'm not trying to prevent them from making the objection, but when they realize they will actually have to work at it, it becomes something they don't really want to do."

Several respondents noted the importance of having a reconsideration policy and form and offering them to those individuals who were unhappy. Jackson, for example, said, "If anyone

were to formally challenge materials, we are directed to give them a copy of the form as well as the reconsideration policy." Jenna said, "I think the ALA recommends that you have challenge paperwork in place." In addition, Cassie explained:

> I think it's very important to have clear expectations. If someone were to visit the library right now with a challenge to a book, I have our district's policy, I have talking points to talk to them about, and I have [a] form that they can fill out. . . . And then we'd form a committee, and everyone in the committee would read or view the material in question, and we'd read other people's reviews and critical analysis of the materials and come to a decision. So I think it's very clear that there is a set plan, and that everyone in the library knows what to do if there is a challenge.

Other respondents, however, were much less clear on this point. Shelby, for instance, said, "I don't know if we have a request for removal form," and Kendall noted, "It's really difficult to find our challenge forms or procedure . . . so it's possible we don't get challenges because it's not obvious that they can make a challenge." Joanna said her library had a policy but it was not on the website yet. Michelle added, "I did ask the director today [about our policy] and we don't really—it's just kind of a case-by-case basis, because she said we've never really had a lot of issues."

Finally, it is important to note that several respondents indicated that they thought they had escaped formal challenges due to luck. Erin said she was "just fortunate . . . given the community I live in and the book challenge that happened recently [nearby], I do feel lucky that I haven't had any books in my collection challenged so far." Shelby also said, "Part of me thinks I've just gotten lucky." Cassie added, "I haven't had a challenge to the collection, but it doesn't mean I won't. It just so happens no one has bothered to challenge it." These respondents may see challenges as inevitable, eventually, especially if their collections are as diverse and broad as they indicated.

Conclusion

This research has analyzed the responses of twenty-five children's and teen librarians who have not experienced material challenges. We wanted to examine the possible reasons they have not had their collections challenged, anticipating that other librarians might be able to draw lessons from this. The interviewed librarians discussed the complexity of determining where to shelve

items that might be controversial. Though some of those interviewed indicated that they shelved potentially controversial items in other areas (e.g., moving a book from the teen to the adult area), it was unclear how often the new location resulted in less accessibility—and thus de facto censorship—or if those items were simply reshelved in a more age-appropriate location. It should be noted, however, that these librarians emphasized that their collections were not "safe," but contained a wide array of topics and perspectives. In addition, the librarians noted that parents should be responsible for what their children read, but suggested that their patrons were likely more liberal than patrons of other libraries that do experience challenges. Finally, librarians emphasized the importance of studying reviews of materials and preparing for challenges, even if they never come.

Throughout these interviews, librarians struggled between advocating for diverse, bold collections regardless of the threat of challenges and acting cautiously to protect their collections from challenges. This was a complex juxtaposition that the librarians were not fully able to reconcile in their interviews. It is difficult to know how to interpret these results for other librarians who wish to also avoid challenges. Perhaps the clearest lesson is to be thoughtful, reflective, and deliberate about decision-making with one's collection. In addition, it may be worthwhile to challenge oneself about decisions to relocate items within the collection.

However, it is worth noting that many librarians identified their areas as fairly liberal compared to other places (though we did not perceive respondents to be primarily located in liberal places). Perhaps challenges are less likely in liberal areas. Anecdotally, this may be true, but empirical research has yet to be conducted to support this. An additional area for further research is to interview adult librarians who have not experienced challenges. Further, librarians who have dealt with informal or verbal complaints that did not escalate into formal challenges would be a worthwhile group to study as well. How did they avoid a formal challenge? What lessons could be drawn from these situations?

Regardless, every public library should have a solid Collection Development policy, which includes a Selection Development policy, a Request for Reconsideration form, and the guidelines for its use. While the researchers were fortunate to talk with librarians working within communities where their libraries had never encountered challenges to materials, being prepared for that eventuality is an important aspect of respecting community standards. Though it is possible that it has never occurred to some patrons that materials can be challenged, and that

community awareness of such policies could open the door to challenges, it is far better to be prepared than to have to create and implement such policies after the fact.

We believe this research has begun to clarify these sorts of issues of intellectual freedom by interviewing youth librarians who have not experienced materials challenges. We learned that these librarians struggled to be true to the ideals of intellectual freedom while respecting community standards and the age appropriateness of materials for their underage patrons.

Appendix: Interview Questions

Exploration of public library policies and procedures that circumvent challenges

PIs: Shannon M. Oltmann and Stephanie D. Reynolds

Semi-structured interview questions:

- How long have you been a youth librarian (or children's or YA librarian)?
- What is your community like? What are its demographics? How large is it?
- What are your favorite parts about librarianship (specific to children's or YA)?
- How do you do collection development?
    - Follow up to clarify about using vendors, approval lists, etc.
    - Do you read everything you purchase for the library? Why or why not?
    - Do you purchase materials that patrons suggest? Why or why not?
- In the time you've been a librarian, have you had any part of your collection challenged?
- Why do you think that is?
    - Follow up based on what they say—really probe for details.
- Some people might be concerned that not having any challenges means the collection is "too safe." How would you respond to that?
- Does it mean that you're shying away from collecting things that might be challenged?
- Other people have called that "self-censorship." Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Are there topics that you consider inappropriate for children or young adults?
- Or are there topics that you tend to avoid? What are they?
- I'm going to read you a list of topics, please you tell me if you have books that deal with them:
    - Divorce
    - Death
    - Drugs and/or alcohol
    - Homosexuality
    - Puberty
    - Suicide
    - Peer pressure or bullying
- Has this interview led you to rethink your collection development decisions? If so, how?
- Any other thoughts or comments? Any questions?
- Advice to other librarians?

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The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults

Volume 11 N. 2: April 2020 www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya

The Darkest Themes: Perceptions of Teen-on-Teen Gun Violence in Schools as Portrayed in Teen Literature

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the perceptions of librarians and teachers on the use of teen literature (also known as young adult literature [YAL] or adolescent literature in education scholarship) that portrays school shootings with teens. The researchers conducted both focus group interviews and an online Qualtrics survey to collect data, as well as group discussions from an online class for education graduate students on teen literature with school shootings as central to the plot. Both professional populations investigated supported the use of this literature with teens but lacked direct experience using literature with this subject matter and voiced a hesitancy in knowing where to begin in the selection of texts and planning for implementation.

Introduction

There were 110 school shootings in the United States in 2019, despite the best efforts of activists such as the student-led March for Our Lives movement, which formed after the Parkland shooting in 2018.[i] In an age of lockdown drills and a "hardening" of public schools, teens increasingly display anxiety about their own safety—and with good reason, as news and discussions of school shootings pervade the daily media. According to a recent PEW Research

Center study (2018), 25% of teens reported being very worried that a shooting could happen at their school, and 32% were somewhat worried.[ii] A Gallup poll conducted in 2018 corroborates similar results, with 20% of parents saying that "their child has expressed concern to them about feeling unsafe at their school."[iii] This amounts to roughly one in five students expressing concern about their in-school safety. Reflective of current fears, contemporary realistic teen fiction has seen a rise in central plot lines that focus on teen-on-teen weaponized school violence. In July 1999, "school shootings" was added as a new term to the Library of Congress Subject Headings, a system of controlled vocabulary used for indexing in libraries throughout the world. The broader terms include "school violence."

This study specifically examines the perceptions of librarians and teachers who work professionally with teens and their beliefs regarding teen literature about school shootings. The research was guided by several key questions including a desire to know if librarians and teachers share perspectives on the use of teen literature about school shootings with teens, the potential uses for these texts, and perspectives on how, if at all, this literature has changed their professions.

Literature Review

Perception in Media

Media saturates teen culture and identity formation. It can control and craft narratives surrounding events for teens to adopt. The media framing of school shooting incidents has broad-ranging implications: from policy changes, to parent, student, and education professional perceptions. The impact of a school shooting ripples across the country. Muschert explains that "consumers of the news are influenced by the aspects of stories that news producers highlight or downplay. In choosing to highlight certain aspects of an issue, the news media influences public discourse agendas about public and political issues. To maintain salience of a news story, the mass media will shift its focus to examine various attributes over the life cycle of a news story."[iv] Hawdon et al. come to a similar conclusion, noting that media is "a primary source of the information upon which frames are created, reinforced, rejected, or modified."[v] This framing fuels fear of and anxiety about a potential school shooting.

Muschert points out that the news media's distortion of school shooting events at the turn of the millennium promoted the perception that "school shootings were a new form of violence occurring with increased frequency and intensity."[vi] This perception had less to do with any change in violence in schools and more to do with media coverage that "contributed to the general impression that there was an emergent and increasing social problem of school shootings."[vii] This media framing has now become an established rinse-and-repeat script as school shootings persist and as more recent and well-known events such as Parkland and Sandy Hook have joined Columbine in a tragic legacy. Even at the time of writing this article, yet another shooting has entered the national discourse.

As Pittaro suggests, "The widespread fear that followed the Columbine incident surged through the nation as students, parents, librarians, teachers, school officials, law enforcement, and community members frantically searched for answers as to how this could have occurred and what, if anything, could be done to prevent it from reoccurring in the future."[viii] The discourse of fear is played out repeatedly in the news when a school shooting event occurs, capitalizing on the realization that it can happen anywhere and that there is no single profile for a school shooter. Altheide identifies a key source of fear in that "parents' fear for their children's safety shoots up whenever school violence receives mass media attention."[ix] The authors of this article argue that the fear for safety does not solely belong to parents but is inclusive of all adults who work closely with youth. Those fears are rooted in a questioning of the security and safety of one's own school.

While considered rare by those researchers who compare the number of school shootings to the rate of other gun-related homicides, the authors of this article agree with activists and others that even a single event is one too many and that our country has entered a point of crisis in relation to gun violence in our schools. The cultural script in the United States that shooters are aberrant young people victimized or outcast by their communities is a script that is reinforced not just through news media but also in popular media such as in teen novels, film, television, and through sharable content including political cartoons or memes on social media that document the cultural framing at the time of the incident. These popular media sources create an archive of the impact that these events have on the shifting educational landscape and create a record of the fears that manifest and are recharged after every additional shooting.

School Shootings in Teen Literature

There is a compelling drive to have teens read literature with teen-on-teen gun violence as it can provide a vehicle to explore personal feelings and fears in a safe way.[x] Consequently, there has been more publication of teen literature with a focus on school shootings as a plot device to propel the narrative. As the emerging theme of violence in teen fiction continues to grow, discussion centered around school shootings is increasingly prevalent. This literature can serve as a tool to explore the fears and realities of gun violence in our schools. Even for those teens who do not experience violence on a frequent basis, contemporary realism in teen literature can provide a glimpse into the lived reality of their peers who do, which aligns with the seminal work of Emily Style, who discusses how literature can serve as both a window and a mirror for readers.[xi]

According to Wortley, "In young adult literature, the school massacre is implicated in various ways in the representation of the adolescent search for identity. Investigating the depiction of school massacres and teenage gunmen in young adult literature can shed light on the way the genre engages in cultural meaning-making."[xii] The framing of a novel shapes the interpretation of the text by adolescents even when guided by educators. The current concourse of literature available for teens on the topic of school shootings generally follows some established patterns by authors in portraying the normative understanding of school violence (white male teen shooter acting in aggression due to mitigating circumstances such as being a victim of bullying). However, there are a few titles that challenge those cultural scripts with varied skill and benefit to the classroom. It is important to note that educators and librarians should also take into consideration the literary merit of the texts when making selections and not focus solely on the content presentation. Literature is a valued tool for educators, utilizing sociocultural interpretation. This theory approach to both literature analysis and research is based on the work of Lev Vygotsky in which researchers have consideration for both social and cultural developments that shape an individual's belief systems and framework for knowledge assimilation. This theory can be applied to assist students in making meaning of the world. Franzak and Noll believe that teen literature "should serve as a lens to help us see how violence functions in our collective imagination."[xiii]

Jurkowski claims that "identifying with book characters offers two potential outcomes: emotional, in which the reader discovers that he or she is not alone, or informative, in which the

reader learns about specific solutions."[xiv] Fiction can serve as a safe space to process difficult emotions or topics. It can also provide opportunities for growth, allowing teens to empathize, learn, and challenge preconceived notions surrounding situations they have not yet nor may ever encounter in their isolated teenage world.

Library and Classroom Connections

Both libraries (public and school) and classrooms are typically portrayed as "safe spaces" for teens in tandem with the belief that librarians and teachers are authority figures to whom students can feel comfortable reaching out about sensitive issues. While both libraries and schools may carry safe space identification, the expression of it is quite different. As Jones states, "Librarians provide an important supportive role in the community. Likewise, the library is an organization that can impact many teens because it is open and available to all community members regardless of income, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status."[xv] School librarians are unique in their opportunity to connect because they work more closely with students on an individual level to help them find information that is academic and personal.[xvi]

Teachers, very much like librarians, have an impact on the lives of youth regardless of one's background or demographic, and they also "play an important role in fostering a positive school culture."[xvii] Choi states that "one of the most important roles of a teacher is to be a role model for social guidance."[xviii] Given this understanding of the role of teachers, the pressure to protect students is often placed at the feet of those closest to students. As a result, it is often seen as a failure on the part of the educational system that warning signs are not identified by school personnel in advance of a shooting. Public sentiment is often that the safe space of the school is violated when these atrocities occur. Often, once a school shooting has occurred, a narrative of a culture of bullying within the school is spun by the media. The shooting is seen as motivated by this culture, and schools are often faulted for not stopping or intervening beforehand. As noted in Baird et al., "The young people who commit acts of large-scale violence are all collectors of injustices, and these injustices tend to revolve around the perception of being ignored or put down by teachers and peers in their school and by feelings of anonymity and lack of support."[xix]

As past rampage shooting experiences have shown, students do not always reach out to school officials about known threats, and the reason why is often complex and layered.[xx] To protect themselves, "students monitor the information that their teachers have access to and try to

dam the flow of 'data' that could be harmful. Either way, through subterfuge or self-censorship, information that could trigger alarm bells fails to reach adults who might be able to intervene."[xxi] It isn't until a teacher has earned trust that students feel comfortable approaching them.[xxii] While adults may work to create a welcoming and respectful environment, it does not mean that all teens view it this way, as a culture of silence pervades student behavior. Students often do not speak out about bullying and threats of violence because "kids have a variety of social and even physical sanctions that they apply to those who break ranks."[xxiii] In reviewing texts published since 1998 for a secondary study not discussed in this paper, the authors found that a consistent theme in many of the current teen novels about school shootings is the character who speaks out or regrets not doing so when violence is threatened. Using this literature in libraries and classrooms may reinforce the need for students to break this code of silence.

Librarians and teachers may find that using teen literature that focuses on teen-on-teen violence is problematic or polarizing. Some parents and administrators may determine the work to be unsuitable for teens and may try to challenge its use or may outright ban it from the school. This fear of literature challenges is well-founded, as illustrated by the school shooting novel *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult making the ALA's Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books list.[xxiv] Alsup argues that "while the contextual and bureaucratic restraints of teachers in high schools cannot be ignored," there is fear in the "proliferation of 'self-censorship' whereby teachers do not introduce books into their classrooms based on a fear of what retributions might occur, not what actually has occurred."[xxv] The same could be said for library collections development. Cart identifies librarians and teachers as "adult gatekeepers" who "bring their maturity of judgement and their greater experience of reading to the process of putting teens and excellent books together."[xxvi]

While there may be challenges to bringing teen literature about school violence into the library and the classroom, the challenge is one that must be undertaken in order to avail adolescents to the many opportunities for frank discussion that this type of literature may bring. Franzak and Noll stress that "probing the problem of violence in young adult literature is best done in a dialogic classroom where students make meaning in a variety of formats for a variety of audiences and purposes."[xxvii] These types of books provide an opportunity for adolescents to work through problems and find alternative avenues for self-expression, and they may serve to bring a teen back from the edge.[xxviii] As Cart warns, "Today it's not locked closets and cases we

need to worry about; it's locked minds—minds that are impervious to alternative points of view and terrified of telling young people the sometimes thorny truth about realities of the world."[xxix] Teens exploring these themes in literature can unlock their minds, or become "critically conscious," and have a tool to help them think about the real-life world around them.[xxx]

Given the importance of engaging in meaningful conversation with adolescents about their fears of school violence and the potential power of teen literature to serve as a vehicle for opening such dialogue, this article documents a research study conducted for the purposes of investigating librarian and teacher perceptions on the rise of school violence literature and the potential benefits of these books. As Cart states, a hopeful message for librarians and teachers is that "for life, even at its darkest, can hold the promise of hope and positive change—especially when we read about it with open minds and hearts, with intellectual attention and emotional empathy."[xxxi] We seek to establish current perspectives by librarians and teachers with the understanding that those perspectives reflect the work currently embraced in the classroom and the library, and may direct us toward a better understanding of how to encourage more acceptance and use of school violence literature with teens to help them make meaning of their world.

Methodology

This research study was designed to explore the perceptions of both librarians and teachers regarding the use of teen literature to explore the media-saturated and emotionally charged topic of school shootings. The key research questions that drove the study were as follows:

a. Do librarians and teachers share perspectives on the publication trends and use of teen literature about school shootings with teens? How might they differ? What limitations do they place on this use?
b. What perceived uses do librarians and teachers see for teen literature about school shootings with teens?

This inquiry focused on the perceptions of both librarians and educators who work primarily with teens (grades 7–12) about the portrayals of school shootings in teen literature. The study was completed by a team of three researchers. The researchers opted to focus on two different populations that both work with the same literature and age range in order to maximize

the opportunities to identify similarities in perception within the individual populations and to allow for comparison across the two groups.

This study incorporated multiple layers of data collection for triangulation. Three focus groups (two live discussions and two textual discussion threads that were combined) were utilized to collect perspective statements on the use of teen literature about school shootings. The statements were later used for a card sort survey of a wider pool of participants.

The study opened with two focus group interviews: one for librarians and one for teachers. These were structured using feminist methods in which the researchers asked open-ended questions to spark conversation from a group of participants.[xxxii] The focus group interviews were facilitated with a loose structure of non-scripted, dialogue-prompting questions that allowed for more natural conversation to develop rather than following a strict interview protocol. Interviewers were able to "show their human side and answer questions and express feelings," and the focus group interviews became negotiated between all participants.[xxxiii] This method of leading a focus group allowed the researchers to move away from a more traditional "hierarchical relation, with the respondent being in the subordinate position."[xxxiv] This gendered interviewing founded in feminist methodology allowed for some "give-and-take and shared empathetic understanding," which the researchers found particularly beneficial as they recognized their own membership within the group of studied participants as practicing teachers and librarians.[xxxv] This method also allowed for the recognition of the teachers and librarians as the experts of their own perceptions by avoiding the traditional hierarchical structure.

A range of experiences were included in the groups, but a large majority of participants identified as white, and the participants were mostly female. Participants for the focus groups were invited through the personal contacts of the researchers. The teacher focus group had one male (mid-career) and two females (one early career and a veteran), and the librarian focus group was all female, with one representing public school librarians (mid-career) and two representing community public libraries (one veteran and one mid-career). This participant pool represented similar demographic patterns (mostly white and female) as in the subsequent survey and is reflective of the population involved in the work of librarianship and teaching English. According to a 2016 national data set, 77% of teachers are female, and 80% of teachers are white.[xxxvi] Another national data set from 2017 indicates that 84% of librarians are female and 74% of librarians in the United States are white.[xxxvii] The small pool for the focus group was not

intended to be representative of all teachers and librarians. They are case-study informants who provided perspective statements for the later survey. The focus group conversations were held digitally through a conferencing platform that allowed for the recording of both video and audio. The transcripts from each focus group were examined using open coding, and perceptions that emerged from this coding were recorded for use in a subsequent survey.

A third focus group was comprised of two sets of early career teachers who were enrolled in a graduate-level teen literature course and who teach grades 7–12. There were two iterations of this collection (one in 2018 with nine students, and one in 2019 with thirteen students). The asynchronous textual discussion from both groups was examined collectively as one focus group. While this group did not have the unique role of only discussing for the purposes of this study, the process was similar to the other live focus groups in that no scripted questions were shared to spark dialogue. The early career teachers participated in an online module on teen literature centered on school shootings in a Blackboard thread, and each student read at least one novel about a school shooting. The module was not designed specifically just for the purposes of the study, and participants would have still engaged in the discussion as part of the course content and learning goals. Participants had a different set list of books to select from each semester (included in the suggested list of texts in Appendix A) and were able to self-select the novel of their choosing to read. The discussion text was open coded. The benefit of examining this collection of data was twofold. The first iteration aided in the development of perspective statements for the subsequent online card sort survey, and the second iteration aided as a verification of the findings as consistent from both the focus groups and the online card sort survey. The triangulation of this data aided in establishing trends of thought.

In examining the data from the focus groups, the researchers utilized open coding. Codes were named and "abstracted from the language of the research situation" using grounded theory.[xxxviii] The researchers benefited from a three-person team in that they coded first individually and then came together as a team to resolve codes, each "contributing to the development of a shared conceptual analysis."[xxxix] The researchers used a constant comparative analysis by team coding after an initial examination of the transcripts and then, after agreeing on a code set, systematically applied that code set to a reread of the transcripts in order to narrow down the perceptions to be pulled for the survey. The same method was used for the reading of a literature review to develop additional perspectives and counter-perspectives. The coding of the

transcripts included some level of reflexivity as the researchers did rely on their own intuition and personal judgment, as informed by their own practice and reading of a literature review to analyze the data collected. When possible, the researchers used in vivo coding, in which the names of the codes were pulled from participant's own language as descriptors.

Following the focus groups and coding, statements connected to the perceptions of participants regarding the use of teen literature about school shootings were culled and synthesized to be added to a statement list of twenty-two potential perceptions (see Appendix B) about literature on school shootings. Perspective statements were also pulled from the literature review materials and the first graduate student online discussions mentioned above. After reaching saturation, the list of statements was revised for parallel language and the researchers removed redundancies. The statements were then used for a card sort survey employing the digital tool Qualtrics in which the statements were presented to anonymous participants. This style of survey allows for much flexibility for participants as they align with the multiple perspectives. The visual nature of this style of survey also lets participants view their responses and revise easily on-screen. The directions for the survey asked participants to place the statements in boxes identified on a Likert-type scale of "I agree strongly," "I agree," "I disagree," "I disagree strongly." After placing each statement, participants were asked to rank statements within each of the sorted boxes (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree), starting with the first statement being most strongly aligned with the Likert scale category. Participants were also asked to provide a narrative about why they placed their top-ranking statements where they did. The participant placements were examined by the researchers with regard to various comparison categories such as age, regional location, and professional career to look for similarities.

Participants for this survey were invited from within the pool of focus group individuals, researcher personal contacts, multiple Listservs, and through social media. Participants were encouraged to share the digital link with others who fit the target audience (teachers and librarians). The Qualtrics survey had a total of 114 participants. The responses to the card sort were categorized by employment of respondent (librarian or teacher). The percentage response for each indicator (the card perspective statements) were compared to note similarities and differences between the two respondent groups (teachers and librarians) as they placed each into the Likert rankings.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Gender and Age

Gender				Age				
Male	Female	Other	Prefer not to disclose	21–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60 or older
9	103	1	1	28	28	24	22	12

Race

White	Black or African American	Native American or American Indian	Asian or Pacific Islander	Hispanic or Latino	Other	Prefer not to disclose
105	1	0	0	1	3	4

Occupation and Place of Work

Occupation		Place of Work		
Teacher	Librarian	Public School	Private School	Public Library
54	60	79	5	30

Years in the Field

Veteran: 1999 or prior	Mid-Career: 2000–2012	Early Career: 2013–2019
31	34	49

Grade Range of Instruction

Kindergarten–Fifth	Sixth–Eighth	Ninth–Twelfth
34	59	78

Limitations

This study was limited in scope in regard to the participants who engaged in both the focus groups and the card sort survey. This cross-sectional study included participants as a representative subset of the population. The majority of respondents in the Qualtrics survey sample were white women, which is reflective of the population engaged in the work of both librarianship and teaching; however, it does limit some understanding of the perceptions evidenced through the findings. While respondents in the online graduate discussion reflected

more gender balance, the respondents (who had all read at least one teen novel about a school shooting) were all early career teachers across different disciplines.

Data Analysis

Fear-Mongering Literature and Imitative Behavior

The professionals agreed in their ranking for almost all statements except two glaring differences. When asked if the use of "literature about school shooting promoted fear-mongering," 26% of the teachers agreed with this statement, compared to 5% of librarians who agreed. This statement also split the respondents within the profession of teachers, as 56% either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. In this case, those disagreeing with the statement were in alignment with librarians in that 75% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. The qualitative statements that were collected asked respondents to explain their placement of indicators, and results highlight some of the disagreement with strong language. One early career public librarian who agreed noted that she would not "use this type of book because school shootings are a real fear that students have that in many ways [are] caused by adult failures" and that she "would not want to induce any extra anxiety for students." A veteran K–8 teacher who agreed went as far to say that she has "never used it [teen literature on school shootings] and would be appalled at any educator who thought differently." Another veteran teacher noted that she "never would use this. I think any educator who [would] is irresponsible." She went on to say that students already dealing with trauma would just experience more if given this literature and that it "would give them ideas, yikes," indicating that she felt imitative behavior was a possibility.

Table 2: Data for Selected Analysis

		% of Responses			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Fear-Mongering	Teacher	26%	30%	26%	7%
	Librarian	30%	45%	5%	5%
Imitative Behavior	Teacher	11%	31%	43%	6%
	Librarian	13%	57%	10%	3%
A Tool for Discussion	Teacher	0%	2%	17%	76%
	Librarian	2%	2%	12%	80%

Reflective of our (Adult) Fears	Teacher	6%	9%	48%	24%
	Librarian	3%	17%	37%	27%
Reflective of Student Fears	Teacher	2%	17%	44%	28%
	Librarian	0%	5%	62%	18%

One statement that was provided for the respondents to place in the digital survey responded to the belief that this literature "is capable of producing imitative behavior." Here, too, the respondents did not agree, with 43% of the teachers responding that they agreed and 31% responding that they disagreed (the remainder split between strongly agreed/strongly disagreed). In contrast, only 10% of the librarians agreed that teens reading this literature are capable of participating in imitative behavior, and 57% of librarians disagreed, believing that using this literature would not encourage imitative behavior. Comments from participants who agreed included one veteran male teacher who said that he "wouldn't use a novel on school shootings" and continued on to state that he "agreed with the 'capable of producing imitative behavior' [statement]" and that it was "not likely, but possible." One respondent, a veteran high school teacher, noted that there is "no reason to put ideas in young minds if one does not have to. No need to spread fear." A veteran librarian in a public school said that "middle school kids tend to imitate behavior that attracts attention. We don't need to put ideas in their head." Another respondent, a veteran librarian in a public community library, agreed, noting that "copycat behavior is a worry."

These beliefs were in direct opposition to the majority of respondents, both librarians and teachers, who viewed the use of teen literature about school shootings as a potential tool to open discussion and to teach empathy and compassion for peers.

Tool for Teens and Teaching about Warning Signs

Several statements that respondents were asked to place in the digital card sort survey aligned with the broader concept of using teen literature about school shootings as a tool in the classroom. These statements included "as a tool for discussion," "bibliotherapy," "a tool for motivating change agents," "a tool for strengthening empathy and compassion," and "a vehicle for activism." The responses to these statements were consistent between librarians and teachers, and were in favor of this concept. The highest response rate was to the statement that this

literature is “a tool for discussion” in the classroom, with 76% of the teachers strongly agreed, and 80% of librarians strongly agreed. This belief was echoed in the qualitative responses to the survey, and nearly all respondents noted the use of literature as a tool in the classroom in some way. Respondents included comments in the qualitative open-ended prompts about the use of teen literature as a tool to teach empathy, develop compassion, spark discussion, provide emotional support, alleviate anxiety, and assist in making students take drills more seriously. As one teacher put it, “To ignore the power that literature can have in helping students deal with and process these events would be negligent on our part.” The first qualitative prompt asked respondents to explain their reasoning for the placement of the top three items that they most strongly agreed or disagreed with, and of the 109 comments submitted for this question, 68 were coded as “use as a tool in the classroom” in general (with most of those subcategorized as for discussion) or for “empathy and compassion” in the classroom.

Many of the respondents noted that this type of literature can be most helpful in teaching the warning signs that students can look for in their peers. As one respondent noted, “This [use of literature] would hopefully lead to students feeling a strong sense of urgency in preventing school shootings,” and another noted that this should be “more seriously addressed among our students to try to prevent behaviors that would trigger these shootings.” A teacher respondent also noted that this literature can “have a proactive impact on students and their awareness of others.” One respondent pointed out that this “allows students to recognize the patterns” of potential school shooters.

This concept of using the literature as a warning tool also emerged multiple times in one of the online focus group discussions comprised of early career teachers. As one early career teacher noted, “I believe literature like this would be an eye-opener for students. It would teach them that if they hear something or see something, they should report it.” Another male graduate student (an early career teacher who is not an English language arts teacher) noted that “teaching students warning signs and expressing the need to report this kind of information is an essential part of school safety.” In response to his comment, a female graduate student in the same comment thread noted that when teaching novels like this, “warning signs and opportunities to take proactive responsibility need to accompany a reading.” Another stated that this work “entails teaching coping skills when times are difficult, problem-solving skills to ensure all students feel safe, and identifying behaviors in students that are concerning.” Another early

career teacher in this thread noted the pressure felt by both adults and students to respond to warning signs when he stated that "every day I hear someone slam a door or drop something loudly and my heart skips a beat for a moment. . . . Not only am I now responsible for protecting my children against guns, but I am also responsible for finding every single warning sign and making the correct decision every single time I try to help a kid I think is in emotional trouble. It is mentally and physically exhausting, but now is a reality for most of us."

Reflective of Fears—Students and Adults

One indicator pulled from the literature review was in relationship to the increase in publication in teen literature on school shootings as a response to increased adult fears or student fears. Both the librarians and teachers agreed that this increase is reflective of both adult and student fears. Of the teachers surveyed, 72% agreed or strongly agreed that this increase is reflective of adult fears. They also believed it is reflective of student fears (72%). Of the librarians surveyed, 64% believed it is reflective of adult fears, and 80% believed it is reflective of student fears. As one respondent noted in the qualitative feedback to this survey, "Literature always reflects culture." Another teacher noted that it is reflective of student fears and is "reflective of the times." Yet another expressed that they believed "this type of literature capitalizes on people's fears." It was also noted by a respondent that they believed this literature is "written by adults, I feel like they reflect how adults feel about the situation," a statement echoed by another, who responded, "Most of these books are written by adults, they [the books] frequently reflect the fears of the authors." One respondent expressed this view, noting, "As a teacher I have seen firsthand students being more vocal with expressing their emotions and adults expressing more fears for their job as violence becomes more premiant [*sic*] in the community [where] I teach."

One of the graduate students (female, early career) pointed out that "it is understandable that the darker themes of these novels can easily have them marked as being for adults only, but it is important to note that the reading age for these is fitting for high school students. It's also important to keep in mind that some students already deal with some of these darker themes in life." Another student picked up this thread and continued by stating, "This problem [school shootings] is now, unfortunately, an unpleasant reality for teenagers. . . . [W]e must continually update the literature being taught in our classrooms to meet the needs of our students." In contrast to this, another student, while advocating for the need to teach this literature, did so from

the viewpoint that we need to counter the new cultural norms and engage in conversation to acknowledge unspoken fears. In doing so, she stated that we are "too accustomed to this" and quoted a novel about a school shooting in which the author has the main character voice, "The word 'gun' floats all around me before the crowd silences, stills. I don't feel panic or shock. There's just a sense of defeat. This is it."[xl]

Discussion

Asking Students to Break Codes of Silence

The qualitative (free response) survey results included support from both the librarians and teachers in favor of teaching literature about school shootings as a preventative measure. Respondents added to the qualitative comments embedded at the end of the card sort survey, noting that teaching literature centered on school shootings could help teach about warning signs and the patterns of behavior of potential shooters. One male mid-career teacher summed up the general sentiment by stating, "Books that especially focus on the causes of shootings (mental illness/bullying) should be taught because they can immediately have a proactive impact on students and their awareness of others." A female mid-career public teacher echoed this, saying that teen novels about school shootings "allow students to recognize the patterns, discuss their apprehensions, and may [lead them to] become activists for stronger gun control laws." For this teacher, the benefits went beyond just awareness for warning signs in recognizing patterns of behavior, but extended to encouraging students to become agents for change—a belief that was less prevalent in the other participant responses. While a few participants mentioned activism, most who responded qualitatively only extended the benefit as far as detecting warning signs. The belief that novels can teach people to recognize warning signs was echoed by the early career education graduate students in their online discussions with regard to the novels they read about school shootings.

Greguska notes that the "value of . . . [these books] is their ability to teach kids about warning signs, what could lead to violence in schools and how to prevent it."[xli] Teaching literature about school shootings may also help break codes of silence or what Newman et al. call "the concealment game," in which teens hide their actions and the actions of others as "the price kids pay for coming forward can be high."[xlii] The authors note that teens who come forward

suffer a variety of consequences (both social and physical) and that schools in the past have not effectively responded (such as not protecting the identity of a student who came forward or taking the information seriously). The authors further explain, "For those who buy into the adolescent code completely, telling is not even an option; even for more mature and reflective students." They go on to state, "When students see that adults cannot be completely trusted with their secrets or fail to take serious action in the face of a reported threat, they file this information away and act with it in mind. They remain silent."[xliii] As Ames points out, most adults forget how much "kids hide from adults and how much dissembling they do."[xliv] In asking teens to report behaviors, adults will need to break an entire culture of silence that is well established in teen behavior.

While it is an admirable goal to ask adolescents to look for warning signs and to speak out, it is also a task that comes with some cautions. There is no single profile of a school shooter. As Ames notes in his research, an exhaustive study by the Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center report "Safe School Initiative" found "that no profile of a school shooter was possible, except perhaps that the attacker would most likely be male." Ames states that the student would be rather ordinary and from what he describes as the "invisible middle."[xlv] A risk is that in teen literature on school shootings, the shooter tends to fit a stereotype profile (usually a white male teen with a history of being bullied). As the cultural script is reinforced, this may develop into a situation in which peers are unjustly identified.

Asking adolescents to look for warning signs may also create a heightened sense of anxiety and a feeling of guilt if a sign is missed. As noted earlier, teens are increasingly worried that a shooting may occur at their school,[xlvi] and lockdown drills and active shooter drills can create anxiety in youth.[xlvii] While the authors of this study advocate for the use of these novels, the purposes for doing so are not inclusive of the singular goal of teaching adolescents the warning signs or profiles of shooters, as we do not want to place an unwarranted burden on teens. Rather, the authors of this study support the use of this literature as a tool for the development of empathy and as a vehicle for discussions to aid students in processing fears. It is also reflective of our current times; literature should reflect the lived reality of our students, something most of the respondents from this study also agreed with when asked if this literature is an "accurate portrayal" and "reflective of our times." While we want to encourage teens to break codes of silence, we do not want to create a situation where they feel as if they must be on

high alert at all times looking for warning signs of a potential shooter. The authors of this study prefer the motto "if you see something, say something" promoted by Homeland Security. We want to encourage adolescents to share if they hear a threat of violence or know of someone possessing weapons, but we don't want them to feel pressure or anxiety to catch all warning signs. As one of the teachers responded to this study, being on alert for warning signs "is mentally and physically exhausting." This is a level of exhaustion that the authors advocate insulating teens from when seeking to develop safe spaces in our libraries and classrooms.

Range of Experience and Risk Taking as Professionals

As previously noted, both librarians and teachers lean heavily in favor of utilizing this literature to open dialogue on the topic of school shootings. Many of the comments culled from the interviews, survey, and online discussions expanded upon this notion by providing examples of ways it could be beneficial, such as teaching empathy. The researchers acknowledge that the roles and goals of teachers and librarians in working with literature are different and took that into consideration when examining the data culled about selection and use of texts. While most of the teaching participants responded favorably with the idea of using literature about school shootings in the classroom, upon further reflection in the comments section, many have little to no experience of actually using it in the classroom. The little experience they did have was usually allowing students to choose a book on the topic matter as an independent read. The librarians' experience was a bit more varied. Some respondents only shared titles as recommended reading, while others, as one indicated, used it "daily as a high school librarian. Lots of bibliotherapy." One librarian used a selection in a teen book club and said that the "discussion evolved nicely as we transitioned from the story to current affairs."

There were librarians and teachers who either disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was inappropriate for grades 6–8 and grades 9–12. Even though librarians and teachers may find the topic appropriate for those grade levels, the comments reflect a larger hesitancy to use it in everyday practice. While it is understandable that certain topics may make librarians and teachers uneasy, it is imperative that they not be shied away from. Groenke, Maples, and Henderson argue that it is not "enough for adolescents to simply read about these issues as presented in young adult novels; they need opportunities to consider and discuss them with teachers and peers."[xlviii]

Engebretson and Weiss make it clear that "traumatic events are part of the current educational landscape. Both students and teachers live through and with these traumas daily." The authors of this study agree that it is important for librarians and teachers to use these texts "to help understand themselves and their experiences. The only way this can happen is through bravely opening the curriculum to topics that are personal, troubling, and inherently human."[xlix] The authors urge librarians and teachers to be fearless when speaking on these themes and topics, even though they may feel ill-equipped to tackle controversial issues. The sad fact of teen-on-teen gun violence in schools is a daily reality with which we must contend. To ignore it is to silence a part of our lived experiences.

Why Perspectives Matter and Future Considerations

It is important to consider the perspectives of current professionals in the field. As noted in the findings, many of the librarians and teachers surveyed had a desire to include teen literature on school shootings in the curriculum, but for a variety of reasons had a hesitancy to do so in actual practice. The authors encourage librarians and teachers to collaborate when addressing this topic to provide support for one another. Professional development organizations and teacher preparation programs must consider the new challenges that librarians and teachers face in the field when considering literature that tackles contemporary issues such as school shootings. As evidenced by this study, librarians and teachers across all stages of the career arc are interested in more support as they include these texts in both the library and the classroom. Some of this preparation is already being addressed, as the researchers have seen some opportunities for professional development for librarians and teachers in this area of concern. More work is yet to be done for librarians and teachers to feel confident in addressing school shooting literature in the classroom.

Appendix A

Suggested Titles for the Classroom and Library

This list of novels was curated from a multipart selection process. The initial step included a search in library literature (i.e., *School Library Journal*), English literature (i.e., ALAN), and well-known online teen literature venues (i.e., *BookRiot*, *Goodreads*, etc.) for titles that had a plot line involving a school shooting. This determination of titles involved analyzing the subject headings of the individual book's Library of Congress Cataloging information or, if that was not available, an extensive look at multiple descriptions about the novel. As part of a different study, the authors have read and coded over thirty novels that fit the selection criteria from the initial step. The authors have used their expertise as librarians and high school English teachers to select a sampling of seventeen novels and one play that they would recommend for use in a library or classroom for teens.

Aftermath (2018), by Kelly Armstrong
Bang, Bang, You're Dead (1998), by William Mastrosimone
Breaking Point (2002), by Alex Flinn
Endgame (2006), by Nancy Garden
Give a Boy a Gun (2000), by Todd Strasser
Hate List (2019), by Jennifer Brown
Jamie's Got a Gun (2014), by Gail Sidonie Sobat and Spyder Yardley-Jones
Lockdown (2008), by Diane Tullson
Mercy Rule (2018), by Tom Leveen
Nineteen Minutes (2007), by Jodi Picoult
Quad (2007), by C. G. Watson
Shooter (2004), by Walter Dean Myers
Shooter (2016), by Caroline Pignat
Silent Alarm (2015), by Jennifer Banash
That's Not What Happened (2018), by Kody Keplinger
This Is Where It Ends (2016), by Marieke Nijkamp
Underwater (2016), by Marisa Reichardt
Violent Ends (2015), by Shaun David Hutchinson

Appendix B

Qualtrics Card Sort Perception Statements

Directions:

Please slide each individual statement into the box that most aligns with your perceptions [Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree]. Once you have placed each item, please place them in rank order within each box with 1 being the most compelling item in the box.

Do you feel Young Adult Contemporary Realistic fiction focused on a theme of school shootings is:

Statements

1. Accurate
2. Fear-mongering
3. Bibliotherapy
    - Harmful
    - More frequently published
    - A tool for discussion
    - Useful in curriculum/programming
    - For pleasure reading only
    - Realistic
    - Inappropriate for grades K–5
    - Inappropriate for grades 6–8
    - Inappropriate for grades 9–12
    - Appropriate for all grades
    - An accurate portrayal of bullying
    - A portrayal of bullying as a motivator for gun violence
    - A tool for motivating change agents
    - Is capable of producing imitative behavior
    - A tool for strengthening empathy and compassion
    - A vehicle for activism
    - Reflective of the times
    - Reflective of our (adult) fears
    - Reflective of student fears

Notes

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xv. Jami L. Jones, "Freak Out or Melt Down: Teen Responses to Trauma and Depression," *Young Adult Library Services* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 30.
xvi. Jurkowski, "The Library as a Support System," 81.
xvii. Pittaro, "School Violence and Social Control Theory," 10.
xviii. Boungho Choi, "Cycle of Violence in Schools: Longitudinal Reciprocal Relationship between Student's Aggression and Teacher's Use of Corporal Punishment," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2017): 13.
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xxi. Katherine S. Newman, Cybelle Fox, David J. Harding, Jal Mehta, and Wendy Roth, *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 121.
xxii. Pittaro, "School Violence and Social Control Theory," 10.

xxiii. Newman et al., *Rampage*, 167.
xxiv. "Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books," Banned & Challenged Books, ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2016, http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/YAbooks.
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xxxix. Ibid., 226.
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xli. Emma Greguska, "Working through School Violence in Youth Literature," Arizona State University, ASU Now, February 27, 2018, https://asunow.asu.edu/20180227-creativity-young-adult-author-tom-leveen-mercy-rule.
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